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ABSTRACT

The term "accountability" involves more than the recent demand by the public that schools justify the academic levels achieved by their students. Such aspects of accountability as teacher certification, school accreditation, educational evaluation, and student testing have existed for years. The New Mexico State Department of Education has recently raised for discussion four issues concerning teacher accountability: the use of teacher competency testing, merit pay for teachers, the use of assessed student progress in the evaluation of teachers, and the use of student performance data in the school accreditation process. A task force developed ten options for approaching these issues. A recombination of elements from some of these options provides material for further consideration. This new package applies accountability to teacher testing and hiring procedures, evaluation and recertification practices, and incentive plans. (PGD)

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ASPECTS OF TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY IN NEW MEXICO

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ASPECTS OF TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY IN NEW MEXICO

Although New Mexico educators are presently familiar with the term accountability, they will most likely become intimate with the concept in the near future. The 1980 New Mexico Legislative Session specifically addressed accountability concerns in a bill which appropriated monies "to the State Department of Education for the purpose of conducting an accountability study of student performance as a factor in school accountability and the inclusion of student progress in the evaluation of local school district certified personnel." We all know the answer to the question "Why accountability?" The following public concerns force a response to the citizenry supplying the monetary resources: education is not satisfactorily achieving its goals; there is not a reasonable return on the educational dollar being invested; and declining enrollment, oversupply of teachers, and inflation are beyond the control of those administering the educational process. But accountability is now more than fiscal. The focus today includes assessing whether learning has taken place.

However, the concept of accountability per se is not new nor is it a product of the 1970's. Aspects of accountability--certification, accreditation, evaluation, and testing--have occurred for many years in New Mexico public schools. Teacher certification has as its role the documentation of professional preparation and other required qualifications for public school teachers throughout the state. The rationale for certification is two-fold: first to assure the reliability of professional staff in relation to established state standards; and secondly,

to assist in protecting school districts from hiring unskilled, inadequately trained personnel for professional assignments.

Accreditation assesses the extent to which school districts are in compliance with stated educational standards. The process is designed to identify and report any deviations from the state established standards so that corrective action can be taken and adequate standards maintained. Accreditation deals with compliance in relation to State Board of Education regulations, educational standards, and state statutes.

A part of accountability also involves the evaluation of educational practices in school districts which has been undertaken by the State Department of Education for several years. This assessment involves an in-depth look at such areas as instructional program planning and implementation, administrative policies and procedures, instructional materials and equipment, staffing patterns, special services and activities, and district organization and calendar. An evaluation finding noncompliance with educational standards is dealt with in a variety of prescribed approaches leading to an ultimate consequence involving the State Superintendent of Public Instruction suspending the local board and, with the Director of Public School Finance, assuming operation of the school district.

To date, much student accountability has focused on test data. Standardized achievement testing utilizing the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills is conducted statewide each year at grades 5, 8, and 11. This component of the statewide evaluation program provides achievement information about New Mexico students relative to national group performance in

reading, language, math, science, social studies, and reference skills. Results are analyzed and reported at the pupil, classroom, school, district, and state levels.

As in most other states, minimum competencies are assessed by statewide testing. The New Mexico Basic Skills Plan includes provisions determined by the state for proficiency assessment which lead to an endorsement on the graduating individual's high school diploma. The program, including objective and written portions, is designed to hold students and districts accountable for the acquisition of basic skills in a practical context. An examination is administered in February of each year to tenth grade students for the purpose of determining whether an individual can demonstrate appropriate proficiency in the skills of computation, problem solving, identification of facts and terms, reading, and writing.

The skills are assessed within the context of Consumer Economics, Occupational Knowledge, Health, Government and Law, and Community Resources. In addition to the objective examination, students must also obtain a locally established proficiency level on the Student Writing Skills Appraisal consisting of the production of specimens of writing.

New Mexico continues the process of holding its public school pupils and districts accountable for basic competencies. Now a new assemblage is receiving the attention of the legislators: the students' instructors. The State Department of Education approached the issue of teacher accountability by extensively reviewing the work of nationally recognized experts and organizations with experience in developing and implementing accountability

programs and models. The review included the experiences of other state departments of education. From the information collected four main issues regarding accountability have been expounded: 1) the use of teacher competency testing as a part of certification practices; 2) the concept of incentive/merit pay for teachers; 3) the use of student progress in the evaluation of local school district certified personnel; and 4) the use of student performance data in the school accreditation process. Once set forth, these issues required exposure to the appropriate public.

If any new process is to have the opportunity to succeed it must have the support of the audience it addresses. Representatives of the education community in New Mexico were asked to serve on a Superintendent's Accountability Task Force. Members included superintendent-level individuals as well as representatives of institutions of higher education, teacher organizations, school administrators, teachers, parent groups, and professional organizations. These individuals were actively involved in the development, review, and recommendations concerning various approaches to teacher accountability. Deliberations were lengthy and frequently more questions and issues were raised and discussed than solutions found. Issues revolved around such topics as the most effective approaches to the evaluation of teachers, how can acceptable standards of instruction and teacher performance be assured, what types of incentives are meaningful to teachers, and how might staff effectiveness be taken into consideration during the accreditation process. From the many person hours invested, one aspect strongly stood out: there is no simple, straightforward

answer to this complex area. While it was easy to reach general consensus on the areas of concern, certain discrepancies and difficulties arose. This was particularly true in the area of methodology since there are competing ideas about what to measure, how to measure, and how to apply the results equitably to achieve more cost-effective educational programs.

The task force deliberations, in conjunction with the four State Department objectives, formed the basis of an Interim Report containing ten options put forth for review and reaction. Five of these options address accountability in relation to the present educational program while the other five are concerned with the preparation and selection of qualified personnel entering the system. One of the options focuses on the entry of qualified, certified personnel into the local educational system; four options focus on the qualifications and preparation of candidates for state certification; three options focus on the qualifications and performance of certified personnel presently in local educational systems; and two options focus on the improvement of instruction at all levels in the educational system. The proposed options range from the State Department of Education serving as a clearinghouse for information (including the production of a publication dealing with trends, ideas, reports) to the development by local districts of a system of incentives for effective performance by certified personnel. Shared responsibility for implementation of the various options fall upon a combination of the State Board of Education, State Department of Education, local districts, and institutions of higher education.

After the development and presentation of the ten options to various audiences, it became apparent that no one option would suffice. Instead, a collage of aspects incorporating the various options seemed to best address the complex area of teacher accountability. To this end, the following is a compression and compilation being put forth by the author for consideration. It should be stressed that this has not been adopted by New Mexico but is currently subject to a review and reaction process.

A comprehensive teacher accountability program needs to minimally address the following aspects: testing/hiring procedures, evaluation/recertification practices, and incentive plans. The initial step appears to be the testing of knowledge acquired by teacher education candidates. Two testing time frames would be desirable, the first occurring as one criteria for admission to the professional schools of education in our colleges and universities. Such an examination would assess basic skills in language, mathematics, and reading. The test would be developed as a joint effort by the institutions of higher education and the State Department of Education and a minimum score, to be used statewide for professional school admission purposes, would be determined. Failure to meet the minimum standard would result in the need for additional course work after which the candidate for admission could sit for reexamination. Operationalization of this proposal would require the cooperation, involvement, and support of the state institutions of higher education. Testing at this point in the prospective educational student's career provides an additional piece of information upon which they may

base a decision. If they have not obtained the required level of basic skills, this is the time for acknowledgement of the deficiency - not upon completion of a teacher education program or when they have entered the professional field.

The second testing period would occur as a requirement for all college of education graduates. Here an examination with wide usability, such as the National Teachers Examination, could be incorporated. Such an examination should assess the general education considered essential for a well-educated person to function and communicate effectively, as well as emphasizing the professional knowledge considered necessary for all entry-level teachers whatever their field of specialization. In addition, it would be highly desirable to have an assessment of the teachers' acquired understanding of knowledge in their area of specialization. Use of the scores from this testing program would involve the determination of a minimum score set by the State Department of Education in conjunction with local educational agencies. As with the initial testing program, those failing to meet the minimum acceptable score would enroll in additional course work and could then sit for reexamination. The minimum score would be used by the State Department for the purpose of initial certification. The local school district's use of the score would include, as a part of the accreditation process, having on file with the State Department and subject to its review, the use of test scores as a criteria in the district's plan for hiring competent, qualified instructional staff.

The application of acquired knowledge and skills is extremely difficult to assess in an objective testing mode. Evaluation

efforts appear to be the most appropriate assessment of this aspect and we are thus lead to the second facet of teacher accountability which involves the evaluation process during the nontenured years of a teaching career. It is unfortunate that personnel evaluations are often viewed in a punitive manner. A concerted effort needs to be mounted to assure that evaluations are viewed in terms of identification of areas of strength and areas requiring additional training in order for appropriate support systems to be provided. Again, to elicit necessary support, the appropriate audiences need to be involved in determining the criteria for evaluation. Such an involved process would require the attention of local administration and instructional staff as well as involvement of the State Department of Education.

Three evaluations (conducted by the administration and experienced instructional staff personages) are proposed for the initial year of teaching. The purpose of such extensive evaluation would be to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to construct an Individual Teacher Development Plan to address acknowledged weaknesses and provide appropriate in-service training and support. The second and third year would require at least two evaluations of nontenured teachers conducted by the administration and instructional staff personnel. The evaluations conducted the second year would have as their primary focus recording Individual Development Plan progress as well as providing continued support for the novice teacher. This focus would continue into the third year with the exception of those individuals not recording satisfactory progress. In such cases the third

year becomes a probationary period. Tenured teachers, as presently required by Educational Standards for New Mexico Schools, would continue to receive a minimum of one evaluation per school year. At the end of the three years, the initial certificate would expire and a "watershed" point would be reached. It is at this point that two entities need to make decisions regarding future career plans. The individual teacher, based on three years of experience, should be able to make an appropriate decision as to whether the proper career field has been entered. If yes, then an application for recertification with summary data of the three year evaluation process would be transmitted to the State Department of Education. It is also at this time that the local school district, based on the three years of evaluation information, would make a decision regarding tenure for the individual.

For those receiving tenure, the third aspect of a comprehensive accountability program comes into existence. This program involves,as a part of the accreditation process, the development and implementation of a plan by each school district to address the motivation of tenured instructional staff to ensure continued professional growth and development. Various incentives could appropriately be employed. As an example, a differentiated teaching staff, which establishes various levels of responsibility and compensation, would be appropriate for inclusion in a district's incentive plan. General characteristics of this type of program might include master, staff, and associate teachers. The associate teacher would be the newly tenured teacher spending most of his or her time in the classroom. The staff teacher having more experience, would be assigned more difficult responsibilities such as tutorial

sessions and small group instruction. Such a teacher would also work on new curricula. The final step would be classification as a senior or master teacher. This individual would, in addition to some teaching, consult with associate teachers, develop new teaching strategies, set up in-service training, and develop resource banks for new instructional materials. Responsibilities would be districtwide for the application of research to curriculum design.

Another type of compensation could involve an approved study arrangement whereby teachers are compensated for the completion of graduate courses. Course work would need to be approved by the district and be relevant to the teacher's job requirements. Often in such a plan, tuition is paid by the school system. Still another alternative would be to establish procedures for sabbatical leave for teachers.

And certainly there is always the possibility of merit pay incentives for those brave enough to face the various issues which arise in this type of program. For those interested in setting aside a specified sum of money to be distribured to those deemed worthy by virtue of outstanding teaching performance, there are certain criteria which appear necessary for success; merit plans should be used to improve instructions and not for punitive actions; after implementation of the plan, the local board's role is finished; a sufficiently large amount of money to provide a real incentive needs to be provided; and provisions for an appeal procedure should be established.

In New Mexico, to quote a phrase from a song popular sometime ago, "We've only just begun." We are well aware we have a

monumental task before us. A reasonable time frame for implementation of the various aspects appears to be three to five years. The testing component, including validation for our state, would hopefully be brought on line in one and a half years. The evaluation aspect will require numerous person hours of hard work to reach a semblance of consensus as to what competencies should be assessed. Perhaps a three year time frame is reasonable for this factor. Developmental work to provide guidelines, directions, and implementation plans for incentive programs can also be expected to take at least three years. Since Collorary #2 of Murphy's Law states "Everything takes longer than you think," perhaps five years is a more realistic time frame. We are not going to re-invent the wheel. We are going to learn from the experiences of our colleagues in Georgia, New Jersey, Florida, Louisiana, and other states. We shall utilize their positive findings, as well as concentrate on developmental activities in new areas. We shall continue our process of refinement to adapt and incorporate results from what has previously been researched and that which is to be undertaken in the immediate future.

The author has attempted to outline a logical framework for approaching the quest of "teacher accountability." In closing, demarcation of the topic brings to mind Humpty Dumpty in Chapter VI of Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass:

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said,
> in rather a scornful tone, "it means
> just what I choose it to mean - neither
> more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Only the bravest souls among us or the Humpty Dumpties would claim their definition to be <u>the</u> definition of accountability.